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COMMUNION WITH GOD IN THE BIBLE

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IV. IN CHRIST

The same difficulties that we found to beset the attempt to estimate the piety of the Old Testament upon its inner side, confront us also in the New. And for the same reason. The life of the Christian and of the Hebrew saint alike is rooted indeed in faith, but it expresses itself largely in social relationships and activities. When Jesus was asked by an earnest man the way of eternal life, he pointed him to those commandments in the Decalogue which emphasized the duties of men to society. The secret sources of the life are seldom laid bare. Much may be inferred with certainty, but little is directly said. Considering the vivid apprehension of God and of the spiritual life which pervades the New Testament, its recorded prayers are astonishingly few. This, it may be said, is due to its subject-matter: narratives and letters give little scope for prayer. Still, this is only a partial explanation; the fact remains that even the recorded prayers of Jesus are very few, and, apart from the Gospel of John, very brief. He himself had bidden men, when they prayed, to enter into the chamber, and shut the door; what took place behind the closed door was an affair between the soul and God.

It is, however, of peculiar importance to ascertain, so far as we may, the nature of the communion of Christ with God; for, in some sense at least, he must be the norm as well as the dynamic of the Christian consciousness. If it is true that he brings us into relations with the Father which are impossible without him and apart from him, it is also true that his own relation to the Father is the perfect type of that toward which we strive, however unsuccessfully, to conform. But while we study the inner life of Jesus with the hope of meeting much which we may reproduce, however imperfectly, in our own lives, we shall never even begin to understand his secret until we recognize that, in the profoundest sense, he stands

absolutely alone, and no other son of man can be placed by his side. He is like us, so like us that we feel he is our best and deepest self; but he is unlike us—identified with God as no other ever has been or can be. There is a sense in which our communion with God may be like his: there is another sense in which his communion with God is without parallel. Men may be sons of God, he is *the* Son. So much more intimate was his relationship with the Father than any other man's can be that God can be addressed as the "Father of our Lord Jesus Christ." Our familiarity with this phrase is apt to blind us to its astonishing implications. It may be considered to have a remote parallel in the Old Testament addresses to the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, at least in so far as it contemplates God in relation to a historical personality; yet it is something widely different and deeper. It is no doubt a subtle reminiscence of Jesus' own method of prayer: for was it not he pre-eminently who had called God Father? But further, it is a most remarkable tribute to his uniqueness that Paul thus calls him the Father of Jesus. It suggests that this new relation to God, which involved nothing less than a spiritual revolution, had been created and mediated by Jesus. It suggests the infinite obligation of all men to Jesus for the assurance of this new relationship.

The hottest battle in the modern theological world rages round this very point of the uniqueness of Jesus. It was natural that the historical criticism which had succeeded in explaining so much, both in Old Testament and New, by its wide and ever-widening knowledge of contemporary and antecedent historical conditions, should imagine that Jesus could also in this way be adequately explained. Many parallels to his sayings and doings could be adduced from many quarters, and the larger our knowledge grew, the more the mystery of his personality seemed to vanish. His miracles and his claims might seem to offer an intractable residuum, but even they could be disposed of. Some of the miracles might be simply imitations of miracles associated with Old Testament saints, others due to misunderstood metaphors, others to the almost unconscious devices of an affectionate and pious imagination: many of the healing miracles were allowed right-of-way, simply because parallels could be adduced from modern medical experience. The claims of Jesus

might be disposed of with equal facility. They are not claims, it is urged, made by Jesus for himself, but claims made for him in later days by a church which loved, revered, and worshiped him. In this way Jesus is skilfully reduced to common human measure, and he stands before us great indeed, but only the greatest among the sons of men. He is head and shoulders above the people, but that is all.

Now no intelligent man would wish to underestimate the difficulties connected with the interpretation of an ancient literature, necessarily steeped in conceptions remote from the modern mind; least of all, when to those inevitable difficulties are added others which spring out of the intricacies and perplexities of the synoptic problem. Still it has to be confessed that much which passes for criticism comes to its estimate of Jesus with its mind made up. Certain kinds of evidence are more or less deliberately ruled out, simply because the Figure to which they point would be of more than human proportions. This is seldom indeed the avowed basis of the reconstruction, but it is frequently the tacit assumption; and there is just enough in the variety and divergences of the narratives themselves to lend a certain plausibility to results reached from this presupposition. But there are not wanting signs that a more cautious and comprehensive criticism will soon demand a hearing—a criticism not less historical but more spiritual; not less ready to test evidence, but more sympathetic to what one might call uncongenial evidence; more willing to recognize that behind a literature so unique as the New Testament and so unanimous in its testimony to Jesus Christ, must lie a Personality no less unique than Jesus Christ as attested by that New Testament.

This is not the place to deal with the literary and critical aspects of this problem; but it is the writer's conviction that an unprejudiced investigation can only lead to the conclusion that Jesus stands alone among men, that toward God on the one hand and man on the other he sustains relations which are altogether unique. The uniqueness of Jesus is asserted with special emphasis and frequency in the Fourth Gospel; but if this testimony is rejected as unhistorical and inconclusive, that uniqueness is just as integrally, if not as obviously, interwoven with the Synoptic Gospels. In the Fourth Gospel Jesus claims to be the Light of the World, the Resurrection

and the Life, the Way and the Truth, etc.—claims which, it may be said, do not suggest the historical Jesus; but in the Synoptic Gospels, he claims to forgive sins, to have come to seek and save the lost, to give his life a ransom for many, to be the final Judge of men. The one set of claims is really as stupendous as the other; and if both be ignored as later interpretations of the church rather than express declarations of Jesus himself, the question still remains: Who and what is this Man for whom, with any sort of propriety, such claims could be made at all? The felt necessity for such an extraordinary interpretation surely points to an extraordinary man—a man literally extra-ordinary, *out of the line* of other men, a man by himself, alone.

The interest of this consideration for our discussion lies here: that, if all this be true, the filial consciousness of Jesus was different, in some real way, from the filial consciousness of other men, and communion with God must have been for him what it never has been for any other member of the race. We have not the space here to argue this: it will be enough to recall certain words and situations which can be vindicated at the bar of literary and historical criticism, and which irresistibly suggest the uniqueness of Jesus. Of these the most notable is this: "All things have been delivered unto me of my Father, and no man knoweth the Son, save the Father; neither doth any know the Father, save the Son, and he to whomsoever the Son willeth to reveal him." There Jesus claims to sustain a special relation alike to God and man. He is the Son, as no other man can be; all things connected with the revelation of the Father have been deliberately committed by the Father to him; and for their knowledge of the Father men are dependent on him. He is Revealer and Mediator, in both capacities supreme—not one among the many sons of God, but conscious of standing in a unique relation to him, and therefore to them.

This consciousness shines out from not a few of the sayings of Jesus. "Everyone who shall confess me before men, him will I also confess before my Father who is in heaven. But whosoever shall deny me before men, him will I also deny before my Father who is in heaven." Here again is the same unique relation to the Father—in a special sense he is *his* father—and the same unique relation to men; the ultimate destiny of men at the hands of the

Father is to be determined by their attitude to Jesus. Similarly in the great judgment scene toward the close of the Sermon on the Mount, it is to him, as Judge, that men direct their final appeal, and he who bids the evildoers depart from him. There can be little doubt that Jesus left upon the minds of his followers the impression that he was to be the Judge of men. Again the wise man is he who builds upon his words, the fool is he who rejects them, and the life that rejects them is ruined. There are other sayings hardly less astonishing, through which Jesus expresses his consciousness of a unique relation to men. "If any man cometh unto me, and hateth not his own father and mother and wife and children and brethren and sisters, yea, and his own life also, he cannot be my disciple" (Luke 14:26). Even allowing for editorial expansion in the relationships enumerated in this verse, there is a certain originality about it which marks it essentially as a word of Jesus. It is easy to see that offense might readily be taken at a statement so extreme, and in Matt. 10:37 the thought is expressed more mildly: "He that loveth father or mother more than me is not worthy of me." But Jesus is a perpetual surprise; and the word *hate*, daring and impossible as it may seem, is altogether in his original manner. We cannot of course suppose that he who enjoined the love of enemies, demanded from his disciples that they should literally hate their nearest and dearest; the word is but an extreme expression for the unflinching severity with which a would-be disciple must contemplate any tie that held him back from whole-hearted allegiance to Jesus. But even so, what a claim it is on the part of Jesus! For his sake men must be prepared to abandon everyone, everything. *For my sake*. This phrase appears in the most striking connections. For his sake men are to be ready and even glad to face danger, persecution, death. His cause is identical with the cause of the kingdom of God; what they suffer for it they suffer for him.

This unique relation of Jesus to men is, as we have said, only the correlative of his unique relation to God, and therefore his communion with God must have been of altogether peculiar and unparalleled intimacy. In this connection it is very significant that there is never any note of contrition in the prayers of Jesus. He confesses nothing because he has nothing to confess. The Lord's

Prayer, with its petition for forgiveness, is rather the disciples' prayer than his own. "When ye pray, say, 'Forgive us our sins'" (Luke 11:2-4); but he did not so pray. The uniqueness of the intimacy subsisting between Jesus and the Father is especially marked in the baptism. His filial consciousness had no doubt a much earlier origin, though it is impossible to say when it began; but in that supreme hour when it fell to him to emerge from the solitude of his private life and to enter, by a deeply solemn and significant act, upon his public career, there came to him the divine reassurance that he was indeed not only one among many sons, but the beloved Son, with whom God was well pleased—the divine certainty that he was indeed the King and the Servant of whom psalmist and prophet had sung.

We have considered, all too briefly, that aspect of the inner life of Jesus in which he stands alone: let us look now at such aspects of that life as more nearly touch our own. An examination of the prayer life of Jesus reveals the interesting fact that nearly all his recorded prayers are connected with crises in his mission. Doubtless his whole public ministry was rooted and grounded in private prayer, and his dying prayer, "Father, into thy hands I commend my spirit," was the prayer of all his life. But it is natural that most of the recorded prayers or allusions to prayer are connected with occasions of special importance. Before he chose the Twelve, for example, "He went out into the mountain to pray, and he continued all night in prayer to God." His earnest prayer which lasted "all night" is very explicable and very significant, when we consider that, humanly speaking, the whole future history of the kingdom of God upon earth depended upon his choice of these men. Similarly, all the great crises of his ministry are accompanied by prayer—the baptism, the confession of his messiahship at Caesarea Philippi, the agony of the garden, and the cross. "Now it came to pass," says Luke (3:21 f.), "when all the people were baptized, that, Jesus also having been baptized *and praying*, the Holy Spirit descended upon him." And again, "*as he was praying* apart, the disciples were with him; and he asked them, saying, Who do the multitudes say that I am?" (Luke 9:18). It was necessary that the right moment should be chosen for this confession, and on this point he must have the clear-

ness and certainty which only his Father could give him. Probably, too, his miraculous acts of healing were accompanied by prayer. It was "after looking up to heaven" that he spoke the emancipating word to the man who had been deaf and dumb. The spirit that possessed the epileptic boy at the foot of the mountain could only be cast out by prayer. All that concerned his life-work Jesus committed in prayer into his Father's hands. Often, too, we note that he is said to have spent the night in prayer after a day with the multitude. For example, in the morning of the day after he had "healed many that were sick with divers diseases, a great while before day he rose up and went out and departed into a desert place and there prayed." The strength which the work of the day had exhausted had to be recovered before facing the demands of another day; and this could best be done in the silence of the night and in quiet communion with his Father.

Confession, as we have seen, plays no part in the prayers of Jesus; but thanksgiving, intercession, and petition must have abounded. One signal difference, speaking generally, between Old Testament prayer and New, is that in the former petition predominates; in the latter, thanksgiving. This note of gratitude, which rose so naturally to the lips of men when they thought of the "unspeakable gift," was in reality caught from Jesus himself. "I thank thee, Father"—some of his recorded prayers and no doubt many of those unrecorded thus began. He offered thanks before feeding the multitude. He offered thanks because the revelation of the Father was given to the childlike of heart. Alike over earthly things and heavenly, over the bread that perisheth and the mystery of the divine will, Jesus rejoiced, and for them he thanked his Father. The few allusions to intercessory prayer give us a glimpse into the great pleading heart of Jesus, who knew our frailties, bore our griefs, and carried our sorrows. Most wonderful of all is his prayer for his tormentors, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do." In his hour of keenest agony, he obeys the law which he had enjoined upon his disciples—to pray for those who abused and persecuted them. And he who interceded for cruel enemies would naturally intercede for frail friends; so we find him praying for Peter that his faith fail not, and—in John—praying for all his disciples, that they might be

preserved from the evil one and sanctified in the truth; and not for the disciples only, but for all who through them should be led to believe in him.

The petition which embraces all others, and which must have been always in the mind of Jesus and frequently upon his lips, is "Thy will be done." But this was quite consistent with specific requests, and even with prayer for material things. There is no strained or unnatural idealism in the teaching of Jesus. He frankly recognized the material substrate of our life, and did not exclude it from the sphere of prayer. He taught his disciples to pray for their daily bread, and he himself prayed in the hour of his agony that the cup might pass from him, thus legitimatizing prayer for material blessings and the alleviation of misery, and also for deliverance from distress. But infinitely deeper than the longing for deliverance was the desire that the divine will be done. "Not my will, but thine be done." In the awful agony of Gethsemane Jesus prayed that the way might not be so terrible; but, through and above all, that the will of God be done. His desire was that the Father should be glorified through his perfect obedience and submission. Once indeed it would seem as if Jesus' sustaining consciousness of fellowship with the Father was momentarily clouded. In the anguish of the cross, he meekly asks his God, in the words of an ancient psalm, why he had forsaken him. Yet this very question, wrung as it were from the very deepest depths of sorrow, shows that even then he felt himself not utterly forsaken; he could still say *my* God. And afterward the old triumphant filial consciousness reasserted itself; and, the feeling of abandonment now gone, he commended his spirit into his Father's hands.

There is no better index, within brief compass, to Jesus' conception of what is involved in communion with God, than the Lord's Prayer. True, as we have seen, it is in a sense our prayer rather than his: yet it also illustrates with singular comprehensiveness, simplicity, and power, his own attitude to God. It begins characteristically by addressing God simply as "Our Father," thus suggesting not so much his power as his affection for us his children, and reminding us of our common brotherhood to each other through our common sonship to him. In calling him the Father *in heaven*,

the heart is touched to reverence and awe, as it thinks of this Father as infinitely high above the children who cry to him—high as the heaven is above the earth. The prayer for the hallowing of his name is more comprehensive than it seems to one unfamiliar with the language of the East. The name covers everything connected with the being and character of God, and all this must be had in holiest reverence. He must be thought of and spoken of worthily. It is not only profanity that is implicitly rebuked in this petition, but every kind of levity in religious things—vulgarity, thoughtlessness, indifference, irreverence. The petition for the coming of the kingdom of God could hardly fail to find a place in the prayer of one who came to proclaim that kingdom and to usher it in. In its essence, that kingdom was moral and spiritual—as Paul says, righteousness, peace, and joy in the Holy Spirit. That petition looks out upon a day, when, under the acknowledged kingship of God, all the interests and ambitions of men will be controlled by the necessities of the kingdom. But over all and in all the will of God must be supreme, and the petition that the divine will be done is in a sense the climax of the earlier part of the prayer. How simple, yet how sublime and searching these capacious phrases are! We think of the divine will as fulfilled upon the great arena of history; we think of it also as done within the compass of the individual soul. These two thoughts—the kingdom and the man—were ever present to the mind of Jesus. The sublimest illustration of this prayer for the triumph of the will of God is Jesus' own petition in Gethsemane: "Not my will, but thine be done."

From the contemplation of the divine kingdom and the divine will, we turn in the fourth petition to the needs and frailties of men. The prayer, "Give us our daily bread" is a recognition, as welcome as it is simple, of the material basis of human life. It is not a prayer for prosperity, still less for luxury, but simply for that which makes life possible, and even that simply for the day: the prayer is so worded as to encourage in us a sense of continual dependence upon God. But man needs forgiveness as well as bread; there can be no deep happiness for him, no true life at all, unless there is reconciliation with the Father; and forgiveness—we are reminded—is only possible to the man who is willing to forgive. We need further not only

forgiveness for the past, but preservation from the perils into which the temptations of the future and our own evil nature will bring us. Hence the pathetic appeal for deliverance from evil—that terrible force in human life which thwarts the Father and the establishing of his kingdom and the doing of his will.

Thus the Lord's prayer is a beautiful mirror of the consciousness of Jesus in its relation to God and to human life. Despite the peculiar intimacy of his communion with the Father, he, too, knew of that conflict with temptation, which forms the theme of the closing petitions. His temptations were not ignoble like ours, but they were real. He feels the force of it when Peter would fain divert him from the stern path which God had ordained for him. The story of the Temptation probably summarizes many experiences which came to him in the prosecution of his divinely appointed work. Everywhere there was a Satan who had to be faced and fought; and that story suggests that some of the weapons Jesus used in the fray were drawn from the armory of Old Testament Scripture. It was with three of its great words that he repelled the temptations that came to him as he solemnly faced his messianic work; it was in its words that he opened and vindicated his ministry; it was in words borrowed from it that he instituted the supper which commemorates his death; and in its words finally that he commended his spirit into his Father's hands. Jesus' communion with God was unquestionably nourished and sustained in part by loving communion, through the Scriptures, with those of his people to whom God had already spoken in the olden time. It is also significant that, for his communion with God, Jesus sought and loved the lonely places. The street corners he left to the hypocrites. His own haunts were the deserts and the mountains. Over and over again this point is made. "After he had sent the multitudes away, he went up into the mountain apart to pray; and when even was come, he was there alone" (Matt. 14:23). "In those days he went out into the mountain to pray, and he continued all night in prayer to God" (Luke 6:12). It would hardly be an exaggeration to say that Jesus inculcates the duty of secrecy in the offices of devotion. The presence of others tends to be a peril. The Father seeth in secret; therefore, "when thou prayest, enter into thine inner chamber and *shut the door.*"

The unique communion which Jesus enjoyed with the Father expressed itself in a unique sense of power, serenity, and certainty, as he prosecuted his divine mission among men. Everyone was struck by the authority with which he spoke and acted; power radiated from him. And his mighty work was done in an atmosphere of complete serenity. However cunning his opponents, however skilfully their traps are laid, however dangerous or critical the situation, however timid or perplexed those nearest to him may be, there is never any embarrassment or perplexity in him. With swift and unerring intuition he sees the thing that must be done, the word that must be said. Though his public career was crowded with incidents of the most testing and baffling kind, he has never to regret or retract. He moves serenely upon his royal way in all the security of an unclouded communion with his Father in heaven—not as one who believes, but as one who knows.